

Breaking Out

By Avani Patel

When Debora Samardzija would go watch her boys play pee-wee football, she didn't care about the hits or the stats, the yards or the touchdowns, the wins or the losses.

"All she cared about," Sam Samardzija said of his late wife, "was the one little play her sons had done. That was fine for her."

If only she could see her youngest now. After two years of toiling in relative anonymity, Notre Dame receiver Jeff Samardzija is enjoying a breakout season.

Thrust into the spotlight when starting receiver Rhema McKnight suffered a season-ending knee injury against Michigan on Sept. 10, Samardzija has been far more than a fill-in. He leads Notre Dame with 63 catches, 999 yards and 13 touchdowns, emerging as an indispensable cog in an Irish machine that is averaging 472 yards and nearly 40 points per game heading into Saturday's regular-season finale at Stanford.

Pretty heady stuff for a guy who seemed perpetually stuck as an afterthought in the Irish offense during his first two years at Notre Dame. Now he's a target of agents, who have routinely been interrupting dinner at the Samardzija family home for the last two months offering representation should Jeff decide to enter the NFL draft.

And if Samardzija's production has been a revelation to some, it seems long overdue to others.

In former coach Tyrone Willingham's offense, Samardzija "was always the third option," his father said, behind current seniors McKnight and Maurice Stovall. Samardzija, though, didn't let his frustration over a lack of playing time affect his work ethic.

With his long hair, quick wit and goofy grin, Samardzija seems more like a California surfer dude than a hard-nosed, Midwestern football player.

Off the field he's known as a "loosey-goosey," laid-back kind of guy.

On the field, "he's really cool in the huddle," tight end Anthony Fasano said. "He's always cracking jokes and calming everybody down. But he definitely doesn't back down from anybody."

In fact, offensive lineman Dan Stevenson said, Samardzija is an occasional instigator.

"I like to talk a little bit when I get out there, and Jeff talks more than anyone I've ever seen," Stevenson said. "After I make my block, he'll run over and start talking stuff to the D-linemen. If I have a great play or he sees me on top of a guy, Jeff will run over and be like, 'Ooooooh, you just got whupped,' something funny like that."

A two-sport athlete at Notre Dame, Samardzija first made an impact as a pitcher on the Irish baseball team. His baseball teammates nicknamed him "Shark," not because of his killer instinct on the mound but because his toothy smile made him look like the title character of the animated film

"Shark Tale," or so they claimed.

Stevenson has a better cartoon characterization.

"Garfield," he said.

Like the cartoon cat, Samardzija "is always laying there," Stevenson said. "He's just so laid back."

Garfield becomes animated and excited at the thought of a tray of lasagna. "Football," Stevenson said, "is Jeff's lasagna. He gets so excited to do it."

The game has served as both entertainment and escape for Samardzija, an antidote to the worst kind of pain. In June 2001, when he was 16, Samardzija lost his mother to acute respiratory distress syndrome.

With older brother Sam Jr. away at Indiana University, Jeff and his father found themselves alone in a suddenly too quiet house.

"Jeff dedicated his [junior] season and his performance to Debbie," recalled Mark Hoffman, Samardzija's football coach at Valparaiso High School. "He played every down with a tremendous amount of passion."

"That was his route, his avenue for keeping his mind straight," Sam Samardzija said. "It was probably harder for me. He was doing so well, [and] I had no one to share this with. His mother wasn't there, so we weren't able to share it with her. He's accomplishing all these things and it was still hollow for me."

Surviving on the cooking and compassion of friends and family, the two Samardzija men reserved Tuesdays as father-and-son nights.

"We would go out to dinner and just talk about whatever we wanted to talk about . . . a little bit about sports, but mostly about other things," Sam Samardzija said. "It was my way of gauging how he was handling things. He was handling things better than I was."

The boy, the apple of his mother's eye, spent his last two years of high school taking care of the man, his father, who had been the love of his mother's life.

And though his combination of speed, size and "uncanny adjustment to the ball," as Hoffman put it, was enough to draw suitors from as far away as Stanford and Boston College, Samardzija limited his choices to Midwestern schools: Purdue, Michigan, Michigan State and Notre Dame.

"When I was younger I wanted to go away, but after everything that happened it just kind of made sense to stay close," Samardzija said, the smile in place but the tone of his voice more serious.

Notre Dame turned out to be the perfect fit.

Just days after Samardzija signed with the Irish in February 2003, baseball coach Paul Manieri came across his name in a newspaper recap of the class of football players Notre Dame had just signed.

"The story was about this wide receiver from Valparaiso, but the headline said something about baseball," Manieri said. "Half the story was all about his desire to play baseball."

Newspaper in hand, Manieri walked down to Willingham's office to find out more about Samardzija. Willingham encouraged Manieri to give Samardzija a shot when he arrived on campus.

"We would give him a chance to make our team," Manieri said. "The rest is history."

As a freshman starter, the 6-foot-5-inch Samardzija compiled a 2.95 ERA. Last season he led the Irish staff with an 8-1 record. And this year he is making his mark on Irish football history, with a school-record 13 touchdown catches. His 63 receptions are second only to Tom Gatewood's single-season school-record 77 in 1970. And with 999 receiving yards, he is within striking distance of Gatewood (1,123 yards in 1970) and Jack Snow (1,114 in 1964).

"He's deceptively fast," Hoffman said of his former charge. "For a guy his size, he's able to make little guy moves. That body control, you don't see that that often in 6-5 players."

While Samardzija is blessed with athletic ability--he also excelled as a high school basketball player--he had worked hard on his footwork and his technique for getting away from defenders.

After the football season ends, Samardzija will rejoin the baseball team. And if he can replicate the success of his first two years, he may well have a choice to make regarding his professional future.

Sam Samardzija, along with new wife Stephanie, was scheduled to fly to California on Friday to cheer Jeff on against Stanford.

But whatever stage he is on, there is one other person Samardzija knows is always watching.

"It was always a passion of my mom's to come watch me," he said. "And no matter what the situation is, I'm going to act like she's there in the stands."